

AMSPECBLOG

## Why the Government Prosecution of Athletes Who Cheat?

By Doug Bandow on 7.4.11 @ 5:57AM

Some people may be shocked, shocked!, to learn that there are athletes who cheat--taking steroids or other substances to bulk up. It may violate the rules, devalue their accomplishments, and disappoint starry-eyed fans. But why is it a political and criminal issue?

I'll admit that sports have never much interested me. Tennis is about the only one I've followed, and I share Aaron's sentiment that Novak Djokovic's rise is good for the sport. But organized team sports never have grabbed me.

I find the campaign to prosecute sleazy athletes to be far more bizarre, however. I don't purport to know the truth regarding Roger Clemens and Lance Armstrong, but Jonathan Mahler of the New York Times gets it right:

A Georgia congressman, Jack Kingston, has asked the F.D.A. for a financial accounting of the globe-trotting Armstrong investigation. Whatever we have spent to date, it will rise exponentially if a prosecution goes forward. As we saw with the trial of Bonds, the last object of Novitzky's obsession, there is no guarantee that it will result in a conviction that justifies the investment. How much is it going to cost us to add Lance Armstrong to our list of compromised heroes, when, let's face it, in the court of public opinion he's already there?

The real moral of Novitzky's taxpayer-financed crusade may be that it's time to put sports back in their proper place. Our nation's values are not at stake, as Ashcroft once had us believe. But that doesn't mean we can't all still hope to witness some truly inspiring sports moments in our lifetime that aren't ultimately tainted by P.E.D.s.

While we're at it, it may be time to look differently at the tainted performers themselves, not as heroes or villains but as human beings who existed in the context of their dirty games, who did some impressive things on the field and some deplorable things off it. Their falls from grace may have something to teach us not only about their hubris but also our own misplaced desire for transcendent athletes. Those are lessons that go beyond sports, and we can learn them without the help of a modern-day Eliot Ness.

The investigations have done what presumably is most important, assuming the allegations are true: sullied the reputations of one-time sporting icons. Turning their misbehavior into criminal prosecutions and potential jail time serves no purpose.

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